

# **Social Media Usage in Symphony Orchestras: A Comparative Case of the San Antonio Symphony and the Houston Symphony**

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Social Media Usage in Symphony Orchestras: A Comparative Case of the San Antonio  
Symphony and the Houston Symphony

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Drexel University

By

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## ABSTRACT

This is a comparison of social media usage of the Houston Symphony and the San Antonio Symphony. I interviewed staff members from both organizations to determine which social media platforms the organizations are using and how they are utilizing them to interact with patrons. It was found that both organizations are using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to connect with their audience. The Houston Symphony has been growing staff resources to maintain consistent activity on their social media sites. This has resulted in a larger audience base with a higher level of patron interaction. The San Antonio Symphony is active on the same sites but is not posting at the same rate, as they are at a disadvantage with only a contract-to-hire staff member who is not in the office. Improvements have been made in the past year but content is not posted on a consistent basis. This thesis finds that symphonies who use social media more consistently will realize greater benefit.

Dedicated to:

My loving husband Michael Martin; it is for our future together that I embarked upon this journey. It was due to your encouragement, support and love that I have been able to complete this thesis and degree.

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## INTRODUCTION

Symphony orchestras are using social media sites as tools to foster audience development and patron participation. There are countless outstanding resources available to help organizations achieve these goals, including mobile applications, dedicated web pages with more detailed information accessible via any Internet capable devices. In addition there are tutorials within the individual social media sites detailing how to utilize them as a resource. With the constant evolution of technology, symphony orchestras need to use new strategies in the areas of marketing and social media to encourage audience development. The way organizations interact with patrons on social media sites can be used to develop a relationship with subscribers to improve their continued attendance and support.

At the onset of this project, I hypothesized that the Houston Symphony would be the clear leader and example to follow on how to use social media to the advantage of the organization. In pre-researching this topic it was apparent that the Houston Symphony had a more visible social media presence than the San Antonio Symphony. Therefore it was no surprise to find that the Houston Symphony had experienced more success with garnering patron participation and attendance through their social media outreach. The end result of this thesis, which provides a comparative study of two symphony orchestras, is to offer other symphony orchestras potential strategies for using social media as an effective tool for audience development.

## CHAPTER ONE – LITERATURE REVIEW

The League of American Orchestras has seen a shift in electronic media usage by symphony orchestras. Future projections from the 2008 research findings included in the League's "Electronic Media Survey," by Michael Bronson and Joseph H. Kluger, show a decrease in Internet usage by the general population. As we know now, this was an incorrect projection, especially considering the new importance of social media. Additionally, the League of American Orchestras website "Quick Orchestra Facts 2012" by Heather Noonan states:

"...the vast majority of citizens believe that the presence of live, professional performing arts in the community...improves the quality of life, promotes understanding of other cultures, fosters pride in the community, and contributes to the education and development of children and adults (Noonan 2012)."

Traditionally, social communication and interactions are made privately, but due to the rapid and ongoing usage of social media sites, communication between people has become transparent. This new way of interacting "...makes the personal connections and transactions among friends visible, transparent and accessible ." (Karaus-Hardie) Another key point made by Kraus-Hardie is that, in reality, social media is becoming a major source for personal referrals. "These social networks will connect your loyal patrons with their friends, who in turn enthusiastically will share their interest and excitement in your content across their networks." Also, as a result of this increased usage in social media technology, many arts organizations

are venturing into relationships with sites like YouTube in order to stream their programs. Technology has a very well defined impact on marketing for the arts, just as it does on many other industries. With the invention of the smart phone, the latest technology is in the palm of our hands, and with this the development of mobile apps have increased in popularity. With some of the mobile apps using mobile ticketing which has also lead to group discount sites such as *Groupon*. These new trends are listed in Amelia Northrup's article, "Top Technology Trends: What's Ahead for Arts Marketers in 2011." (Northrup 2011)

Both reports from the Theatre Bay Area and the Pew Research Center provide a detailed look at social media usage in Arts Organizations (Smith 2011; Thomas 2013). The Pew research focuses on how arts organizations connect with the public and the Theatre Bay Area focuses on how different arts organizations are using social media to determine which tools to utilize for the best results.

The Pew report was published in January of 2013 and was a survey that was sent by e-mail to all of the arts organizations that received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) from the years 2006 to 2011. The NEA provided a list of 5,773 organizations; 1,155 organizations completed the survey. The report found that organizations were using the Internet and social media to reach more patrons but were also using it to have online performances and exhibits, sell tickets, and to fundraise. Concerns of the participating organizations included funding to update technology as well as the amount of time and effort of staff that is needed to keep sites maintained and updated.

The Theatre Bay Area report provides recommendations for the frequencies of posts that should be made on each of the social media sites. Facebook needs to be

updated multiple times a day, tweets should be posted four or more times daily on Twitter, and YouTube should have one new video added each week. These reports provide organizations with a starting point for social media participation.

The hypothesis from the “Web communications can help theaters attract and keep younger audiences,” article is that the Internet is a tool that appeals to the younger audience; by using the Internet to build on existing relationships with the audience, marketers can create loyalty (Thomas 2012). The findings show that the Internet is a tool that is effective in serving its audience and is useful in strengthening relationships with current audience members.

In Chris Sturk’s article, “Using Social PR on Facebook for Audience Development, Increased Website Traffic and User Engagement,” it states that public relations are becoming more social, as Facebook is an easily accessible, inexpensive outlet for distributing a “Facebook Friendly” press release. A “Facebook Friendly” press release is a press release that has been broken up into small parts with a photo and is posted with catchy titles to Facebook. Which can then be easily liked and shared with friends on Facebook. It is now a simple matter to take information to the media, a source that has been traditionally used for spreading information, and self publish news via “social” media. A creative way to get the word out is to take an established press release apart and create smaller parts of information with photos to catch the reader’s attention. Interesting data from this article includes: “When it comes to pitching stories to the media, 43% of journalists are getting pitched through Facebook. Even more astonishing, the success rate of securing coverage by pitching through social media is 70%”(Sturk 2011).

*Capacity Interactive* website poses the question: Are you “Preparing Your Organization for Facebook Search?” Facebook users are beginning to use this site as a way to search for events that their friends have already attended or have “Liked.” Strategies include: updating the “About” section and suggests using key words that will help searchers find your organization.

All of these are good examples of how technology is shifting; Facebook is now similar to Google with the added bonus of “friend endorsement,” which leads to word of mouth recommendations. In the Andrea Hausmann article, “The Importance of Word of Mouth for Museums: An Analytical Framework,” states that “...word of mouth (WOM) is gaining in effectiveness as a means of referral in applications such as Facebook and Twitter, [and is] making it possible to reach an unlimited number of people.” (Hausmann 2012, 32)

Audience View announced a new way to sell tickets through the social media site, Facebook. The New York Theatre Company was the first to offer the “AVTiki.” Once a patron has “Liked” their Facebook page, they can easily maneuver from the social media site to the ticketing window without ever leaving Facebook. Due to the software programming, patrons are able to not only purchase tickets, but are also able to reserve adjacent seats for others to be purchased within a four-hour timeframe. This type of ticketing software is innovative for two reasons: the ability to save seats for others and accessibility on Facebook.

Renelle Bedell states in her thesis, “Audience Development: Texas Symphony Orchestras” (2013) that the San Antonio Symphony has “...sustainable management practices likely to lead the organization down a successful path.” Bedell, also mentions that the San Antonio Symphony not only posts information about their

upcoming events, but also information about other arts organizations in a positive light.

What is success in social media? In a post on [Technologyinthearts.org](http://Technologyinthearts.org), contributor “Vivi,” states that success is not equal to the total number of “Likes” that arts organizations receive from social media, but rather how apparent success should be measured by social influencers. Finding someone who is currently reaching your target audience and providing them with a scoop of information will not only expand your reach but also give their profile a boost. “It isn’t about how many followers you have, instead, it is about the quality of your content and the way you communicate.”

In David Meerman Scott's book, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR* (2009), he states that the most important thing to remember about marketing on Facebook is that it is not about generating hype: he goes on to list the three best ways to deliver information, friend to friend communication is vital and is easy to do, pages or as he refers to it as “groups” are the idea way for performing arts organizations to participate on Facebook. Scott also mentions applications like “Cites I’ve Visited” which gives you a map to pinpoint places you have been. While this application is a great visual to share with friends the places you have visited, it is not idea for an arts organization.

Crystal Wallis shares a “Social Media Spotlight: Phillip Mann and the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra” From this 2011 interview with Phillip Mann, the Music Director of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, we learn that “Technology is one more tool in our toolbox!” Reaching a new level of audience engagement is a question that is constantly being asked by all performing arts organizations. With

the uses of social media and cell phone technologies, patrons are able to increase their level of enjoyment by becoming active participants. Patrons are able to leave feedback via texts, blog comments and YouTube voting. This activity is evolving the relationship of the orchestra and its audience with the use of social media. Is the way of the future? Will all orchestras need to be doing more activities like this in the next five years to be successful?



## CHAPTER TWO – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I have compared the social media usage of two local symphony orchestras, the San Antonio Symphony and the Houston Symphony. To gather data and information I will be conducting interviews with staff members who are responsible for each organization's social media sites. Interviews will be conducted in person or over the phone; the questions that were asked are listed in Appendix A. The findings, then can be used other symphony orchestras.

### **Method**

Using a qualitative method to survey two comparable Symphony Orchestras to discover their usage of social media with a focus on comparing how the San Antonio Symphony and the Houston Symphony Orchestra utilize social media to reach their target audiences. Interviews will be completed with Georgia McBride, Marketing Manager at the Houston Symphony and Laura Hernandez Aplin, a contract to hire employee working on social media for the San Antonio Symphony.

### **Research Questions**

How are symphony orchestras using social media?

What social media sites are used most by symphony orchestras?

How are they using social media as a tool to foster audience development,  
and patron participation?

What strategies have been used to increase patron engagement through  
social media?

## CHAPTER THREE – FINDINGS

### Organizational Overview: San Antonio Symphony

Located deep in the heart of Texas the San Antonio Symphony was founded in 1939 by conductor Max Reite. The San Antonio Symphony has a long history with great conductors and times of great success. However, they have faced times of financial hardship recently and their Form 990 for the year 2012 lists revenues at \$5 million, while total expenses are over \$6 million, and have seen a growth in membership sales, as patrons are excited about the new state of the art performing arts venue. Currently the San Antonio Symphony performs at the historic Majestic Theater, but will be moving to their new home, the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, which is scheduled to open in September of 2014. As one of the main performing arts organization in residence at the Tobin, they are expecting to play less to perform there then at the Majestic. The Tobin has explained out side performances will pay 70% of the cost while the residence organizations will pay only 30%. The symphony has three types of concert series, "Classics", "POPS" and "Family", as well as offering an educational program for local elementary schools to attend called the "Young People's Concerts."

### Organizational Overview: Houston Symphony

Celebrating their Centennial Season in 2013-2014, the Houston Symphony is one of the oldest performing arts organizations in the country founded in 1913. The Houston Symphony has over 50 staff members, performs over 170 concerts each season and has a sizeable budget of over \$24 million. With performances in Jones Hall since 1966, the Houston Symphony has established an abundant patron base in Texas largest city. Concert series includes; Classical, Pops, Family and Sugar Land Series with multiple subscription package options. The Houston Symphony is a world-class performing arts organization, with innovative performances like “Tweetcerts,” that results in continuous prosperous seasons. As one of the first symphony’s to project live tweets during a performance, Ms. McBride will tweet the program notes throughout the concert and patrons will tweet back with comments and reactions to the music.

#### Usage of Social Media

I found that the primary social media platform that both organizations are using is Facebook and Twitter. Within five months of each other in 2009, the San Antonio Symphony and the Houston Symphony joined Facebook. McBride shared that they have even used Facebook to communicate emergency information for events, as it is the fastest way to get information to patrons.

Both organizations have Twitter accounts and YouTube accounts. During the Houston Symphony’s summer concert series they have “Tweetcerts,” at an outdoor venue. The Houston Symphony has a YouTube channel with 92 videos, and the San Antonio Symphony has only 15 videos, as they did not have an official YouTube channel until November of 2013. The Houston Symphony is also active on

Instagram, Pinterest and has a blog. The San Antonio Symphony has a link to a blog on their website, it is written by a staff writer from the *San Antonio Express News*, the local newspaper.

With the limited number of social media sites on which the San Antonio Symphony is currently participating, it is obvious that the Houston Symphony is actively using their social media accounts to attract a larger number of patrons to participate on their social media sites than in San Antonio. However, since the addition of Aplin there has been a steady increase in participation in both Facebook and Twitter accounts for the San Antonio Symphony.

#### Monitoring Social Media

Aplin said that she responds to messages or posts on Facebook, with in twenty-four hours, while McBride responds within a few hours, or at the longest, a day. In San Antonio because Aplin is a contracted employee she does not dedicate all of her time to the symphony, in addition she works off site and has only a general understanding of information and events going on with the San Antonio Symphony. Consequently she has to report to a team of Symphony Administrators and has limited permission to make executive decisions regarding social media. The team is: Janni Toomes, Vice President of Operations, Paul Salazar, Director of Patron Services, and Karina Bharne, Director of Orchestra Personnel.

Both organizations have seen an increase in activity on social media sites when posting contests or trivia. The Houston Symphony has seen increased number of comments during concert weekends, and has seen 10% of the posts that are “Liked”, are shared by patrons. The Facebook post with the most activity for the

Houston Symphony with was at the announced of the new music director in 2012. McBride did share that they are currently using Google Web Analytics & Reporting to monitor social media activities but was unable to share the reports with me.

An increase in “Liked” and shared posts has been noticed since Aplin joined the San Antonio Symphony team. However, Aplin has not been collecting detailed data, only monitoring the total number of “Likes” received. When asked about the number of patrons who are active on social media, the answer to the question was addressed as being too difficult to measure precisely. The technology is not available to cross reference an organizations database with the “Likes” on Facebook, and they may be looking into ways to investigate a correlation in the future.

Social media plans or strategies have not been put to pen and paper for the San Antonio Symphony. However for the Houston Symphony there is a plan and it is a part of the Marketing, Public Relations and Communications strategic plan. This is a key finding in my research and is a major difference between the two organizations. A strategic plan is a vital planning tool for any organizations and should include social media.

The Houston Symphony does not have a social media budget but will use funds from the single ticket budget to promote posts on Facebook. As a result of these activities, they have seen an increase in single ticket purchases via these posts. To promote a post on Facebook you pay a \$5.00 fee or more for that one post to be promoted to the top of all your fans News Feed for the day. The San Antonio Symphony has promoted posts and will purchase advertisements on Facebook, but does not have an established budget. Aplin receives approval from Salazar before purchasing ads or promoting posts on Facebook. Facebook ads can be found on the

side bar under the word “Sponsored.” With the restriction of waiting for approval, Aplin is at a disadvantage while McBride has the authority to make those discussions and has a dedicated budget, while Aplin is reimbursed. McBride was unable to share the data she has collected through Google Analytics, and since the San Antonio Symphony does not collect data at this time. The measurable effect of promoting posts and purchasing ads on Facebook is a limitation in my research.

Even though I was not able to see the data that is collected by Google Analytics for the Houston Symphony, the fact that they are collecting data is a step in the right direction. With Google Analytics staff members are able to create different kinds of reports to track patrons activities on their website and social media sites. A true measure of an organizations success can be gained with access to this kind of resource.

#### Staff Support for Social Media

At the time of my interview, McBride was the designated staff person for all social media at the Houston Symphony. However, she shared that she had recently hired a second staff person and would be turning over a lot of the social media responsibilities to the new person. The San Antonio Symphony staff is very small and several things are outsourced or are contracted out, like Aplin for social media, Public Relations, Marketing and recently ticket sales. Both organizations did say that other staff members are encouraged to post and participate on the social media pages. McBride has encouraged a select number of musicians to respond and post on Facebook, as they are well spoken and can provide different perspectives to patrons' comments and questions.

With the lack of data collection from both organizations, I collected the number of Facebook fans on both pages at three different times, in May 2013, December 2013 and in May 2014. The San Antonio Symphony Facebook page has increased the number of “Likes” by 624, while the Houston Symphony Facebook page has seen a huge increase at 4,817 “Likes.”

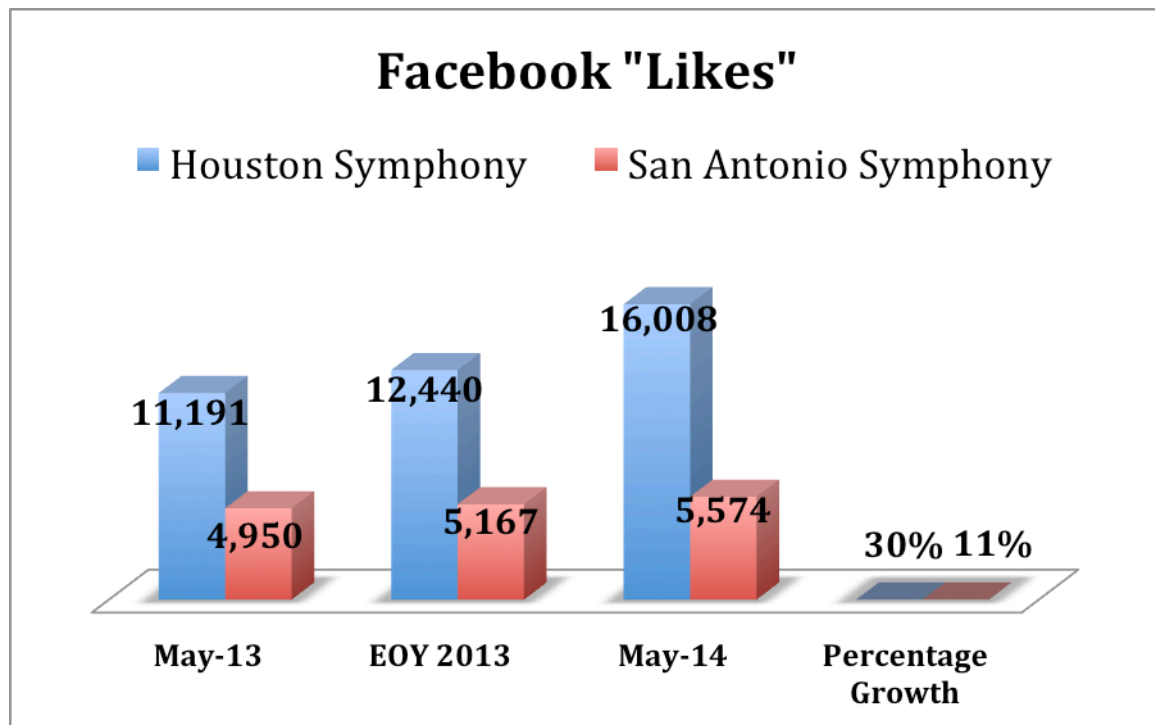


FIGURE 1 – FACEBOOK PAGE “LIKES”: Chart of Facebook data collected from both organizations.

The higher percentage growth seen by the Houston Symphony’s Facebook page can be attributed to the amount of time McBride spends on Facebook and Twitter, “All day, I check both on average 45 minutes a day during the work week.” It is to be expected that her time during the weekends would be less unless she is working an event. As a contract-to-hire employee Aplin is working on social media for other organizations and shared with me that she spends 30 minutes to an hour and half, per day on Facebook and Twitter for the San Antonio Symphony. In spite



of her limited time working on the Symphony's social media, there has been a noticeable increase in traffic since she was hired in the summer of 2013.

Data was also collected in November of 2013 and six months later in May of 2014 to show the number of followers each organization had on Twitter. Both organizations had an increase in followers but it is very obvious that the San Antonio Symphony is lacking in the area of social media and patron participation.

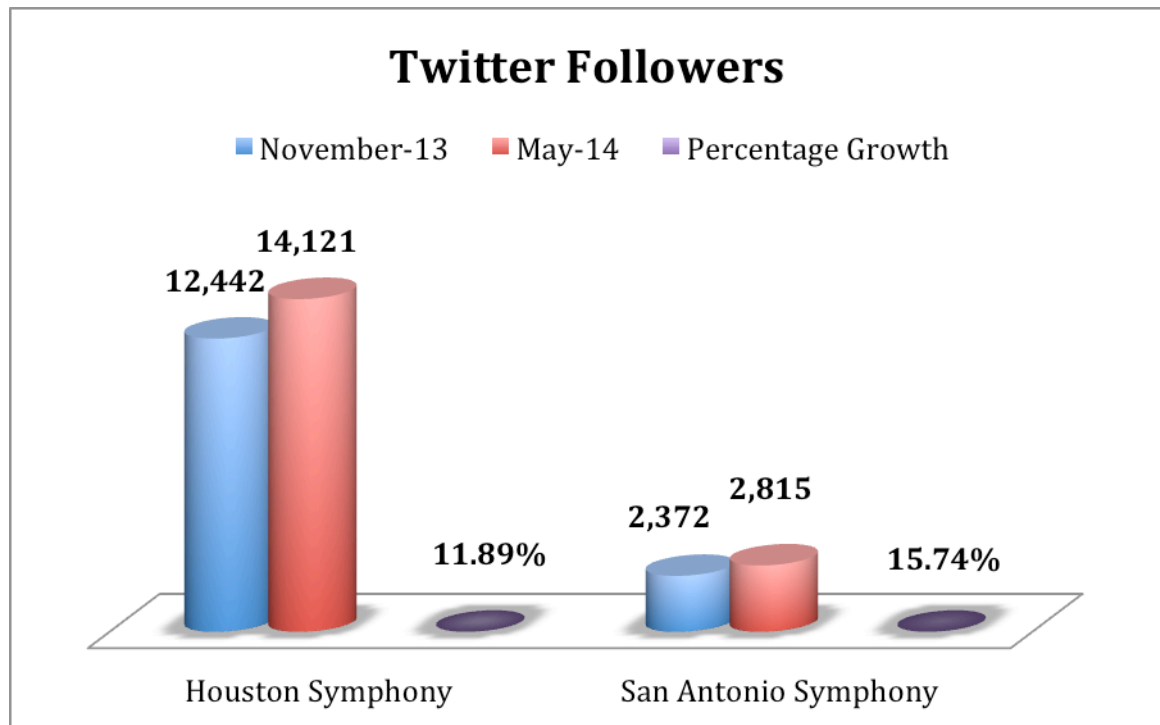


FIGURE 2 – TWITTER FOLLOWERS: Chart of Twitter data collected from both organizations.

Even though San Antonio Symphony's total number of Twitter followers is significantly smaller than Houston Symphony, the growth percentage was higher for the San Antonio Symphony. The Houston Symphony again stands out as the example organization, with a growing number of staff dedicated to social media, as well as, cultivating relationships with musicians as to encourage them to post as the voice of the organization.

### Success

When asked about success in social media, Aplin stated that she felt they were “OK” as she has seen an increase in page likes, shares and comments which leads to more word-of-mouth and a rise in patron engagement. McBride measures success by interactions and whether their page is hot, with lots of activity or cold, with nothing going on. This response led me to ask a follow up question about the time when the page is cold. “Do you try to find something to post or is there a set schedule for posting?” McBride replied that she has a minimum of two posts a day, usually one about concert promotion and one engaging post about the music and the arts.

The Houston Symphony has incorporated social media into their organization by utilizing Google Analytics, including it in their Marketing Plan, budget and has dedicated staff members to it success. On the other hand the San Antonio Symphony is behind the curve with a contracted to hirer consultant, limited budget, no action plan and no signs of data collections or analysis.

## CHAPTER FOUR – CONCLUSION

Based on my findings, my hypotheses that the Houston Symphony has a stronger presence of promoting it self through social media were proven. They have more staff, a bigger budget, and a larger audience base than the San Antonio Symphony. With the Houston Symphony's use of Google Analytics and their recent hiring of additional staff, they have shown how important social media is to the organization. The knowledge gained from this research can provide symphony orchestras with an example of how to use social media to their advantage. This is a comprehensive study between two organizations with data from each; other organizations may use their own data collections to compare with these two groups in order to get a clear picture of where they stand in comparison.

Further research should be conducted in developing database software that is linked to social media, to monitor patron involvement. Taking daily tallies of patrons' levels of involvement, by way of "Liking," commenting, or sharing, would illustrate if the same patrons were repeatedly participating or if they are new "Followers," who then should be targeted to become patrons.

## APPENDIX - A

### Interview Questions

- 1) What social media sites is your organization currently utilizing?
- 2) How long have you been participating on each social media site?
- 3) How are you using each social media site?
  - a. Building Patron Relationships?
  - b. Patron Communications?
  - c. Advertising Events?
  - d. Ticket Sales?
  - e. Other uses?
- 4) How do you respond to patrons/public on social media?
- 5) What determines if/when you respond to patrons/public on social media?
  - a. How quickly do you respond to questions?
  - b. How quickly do you respond to comments?
- 6) How have your patrons been interacting on your social media sites? How frequently?
  - a. Leaving Comments?
  - b. Sharing Post?
  - c. Liking?
  - d. Photos?
  - e. Other?
- 7) Is there a social media plan or strategy for your organization?
  - a. What is it?
  - b. Is this plan or strategy documented in your marketing or strategic plan?

- 8) How much financial resources are used toward social media development?
  - a. Is there a dedicated budget?
  - b. How much staffing is resources are used?
- 9) Do you monitor and/or track patron traffic on each social media site?
  - a. How?
  - b. What measures and/or benchmarks do you use?
  - c. How do you define success?
  - d. Do you consider your organization to be successful in its use of social media?
- 10) On average how many of your patrons are active on each social media site?
- 11) Who are three of your target audiences?
  - a. Of these target audiences, what percentages of them are using your social media?
  - b. Has social media been used as a marketing tool to target these audiences?
  - c. Have you seen an increase in usage of social media by these groups?
- 12) Is there a designated staff member in charge of your social media sites?
  - a. Who?
  - b. What is the department and titles of the people responsible for social media?
- 13) How much time per week does this person dedicate to each social media site?
  - a. How is that time spent?
- 14) Are additional staff members encouraged to participate on your organizations social media sites?

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